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YOU CAN'T SEE THE TREES FOR THE SCHOOL.

BY- MEYER, JUNE

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THESE QUOTED CONVERSATIONS WITH FOUR NEGRO AND PUERTO RICAN STUDENTS AT BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL IN EAST HARLEM REVEAL THE NEGATIVE FEELINGS OF TWO OF THE TEENAGERS ABOUT THE VALUE OF AN EDUCATION AND THE MOBILITY ASPIRATIONS OF THE OTHER TWO. THE TALKS SHOW A FATALISTIC HOPELESSNESS ABOUT THE BARRIERS IMPOSED BY RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND A DEFENSIVE ATTITUDE ABOUT RACIAL IDENTIFICATION. THE RECORDER OF THE CONVERSATIONS FEELS THAT THE MOST "HOPEFUL" NOTE REFLECTED IN THESE EXCHANGES IS THAT THREE OF THE STUDENTS PLAN TO TEACH AND TWO OF THEM ARE ALREADY INVOLVED AS TUTORS. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "THE URBAN REVIEW," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 3, DECEMBER 1967. (NH)

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Benjamin Franklin High School, in New York City, has a population of approximately 3000 students. According to recent statistics, 47.5 per cent of the students are Negro, 44.1 per cent are Puerto Rican, and 8.4 per cent are white. As of this year, 100 students are enrolled in the commercial program, 670 in the academic program and 2286 in the general program. The graduating class of June 1967 comprised 20 graduates of the academic curriculum, 50 graduates of the commercial curriculum, and 130 graduates of the general curriculum. The dropout rate at Benjamin Franklin High School is approximately 42 per cent.

You Can't See the Trees for the School

05674

by June Meyer

Benjamin Franklin High School looks pretty much like most New York City high schools: blurred between pseudo-classic and factory-brick. There are a lot of middle-aged trees and from half of the windows you can see rivers of traffic and water. The view is partly peaceful. From the other windows, those facing on Pleasant Avenue, you can see three- and four-story tenements vacated on top with a "marginal" candy store, or something else, on the bottom. Leading away East to West from Pleasant Avenue, are the crosstown streets of East Harlem — where even modest improvement of six or seven slum buildings will easily receive national publicity.

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preceptors. *Ergo* — students have nothing to offer (teach), and the system need not be localized and sensitive (capable of learning and of change).

Students and their school ought to fit together, seem natural together. The one can scarcely exist without the other. Or so you would think. But you can't use the same focus or keep the same distance in trying to understand the school, and then again the students. Benjamin Franklin High School and its students do not coincide; the place and its people combine like a double exposure. After all "Ben Franklin" is the name of somebody who died a long time ago and "his" school is not altogether different from Grant's Tomb. A [illegible] is no beginning; it is a place primarily related to the past. And our

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The high school is only a short walk away from Lenox Avenue where Malcolm X could frequently be found, before he broke with the Muslims, in the Temple Number 7 Restaurant. This is the neighborhood where Jesse Gray held a "World's Worst Fair" in 1964, and the event proved remarkable at least because New York's Sanitation Department undertook a maiden mission into the area and washed the streets up to five times per block in an effort to lessen the stench that might otherwise shock visitors — especially the television crews.

Now and again, in East Harlem, looking South, it is possible to glimpse the northern edge of Central Park which, everyone agrees, is beautiful.

At the intersection of 116th Street and Pleasant Avenue, the school could reflect a coincidence of hardship and haven, of societal neglect and preparations for self-sufficiency — if anyone thought about physical location as a clue to required services. Businessmen commonly do. But, compulsory public education, like the draft, is not understood as a public service — for those directly involved. Compulsory public education is controlled by goals invariably more abstract than one particular infantry division, or one particular student population. Moreover, differentiated roles are absolutely clear and mutually exclusive: Students are receptors. The system and its paid personnel are the preceptors. *Ergo* — students have nothing to offer (teach), and the system need not be localized and sensitive (capable of learning and of change).

Students and their school ought to fit together, seem natural together. The one can scarcely exist without the other. Or so you would think. But you can't use the same focus or keep the same distance in trying to understand the school, and then again the students. Benjamin Franklin High School and its students do not coincide; the place and its people combine like a double exposure. After all "Ben Franklin" is the name of somebody who died a long time ago and "his" school is not altogether different from Grant's Tomb. A tomb is no beginning; it is a place primarily related to the past. And one teaching problem is certainly that of making the past useful to the future — useful for students to know. Even more, for the teacher of Negro students, the past may simply provide source material for legitimate bitterness and strengthen perceptions of a dead-end. Given conditions of black American life today, and yesterday, teaching should follow the form of a question, seriously raised. For *all* Americans may, at best, relate to American history in an equivocal manner.

Close to one hundred per cent of "Ben Franklin's" students are Negroes. Or black. *Negro* no longer seems an acceptable word. By *black*, by calling himself *black*, the student can more clearly indicate that he is different from, and opposed to white — to what *white* means. Close to one hundred per cent of the school's teaching staff is white.

Four students talked with me about expectations, experience and about the impact or irrelevancy of their education, to date ....

Paul Luciano and Victor Hernandez Cruz are friends. Neither of them thinks of graduation, next January, as anything except a time of "getting out" of the school, *per se*. Paul regards the expected "little piece of paper" (the diploma) as proof that you have been "whitey-fied" for four years.

Paul: I was formerly in the academic program. Now I'm in general.

Victor: General prepares you for nothing.

Paul: People would get heart attacks if Benjamin Franklin was primarily academic.

Victor: They know what they're doing. School trains you to be a factory worker....

Paul: It's like so many jelly beans in a jar. If there's not enough beans, or too many of them, you go to another class. So you just give up. That's the psychology of an inferior person: You give up. That's where your problems start.

Victor: They called a teacher's conference. You know why? About the Middle East crisis. *Two hours!* But they would never call a conference to help Franklin students.

Victor is also in the general program. He has been writing poetry for two years, has published in *The Evergreen Review*, and is relatively confident about a book-length manuscript of poems now being considered by Grove Press.

When asked how sure he is about "getting out" next January, Victor remembers the one occasion when he was not promoted; he was left back in the third grade:

Victor: It's kind of stupid to get left back in third grade. I probably held the straw wrong.

Paul: No, man, they felt you weren't qualified.

Victor: I would've like to have been out of school right now. I know white kids out of school at 16, 17.

Paul: Yeah, but then the statistics would be all wrong.

Victor and Paul are both 18-years-old with little trace of boyhood. They are more like young men forced to play pupil knowing that tomorrow they may be forced to fight as soldiers in a war they regard as insane.

Paul: The program [the curriculum] is a very confusing system. There's nobody to explain it to you. They just, you know, like pat you on the back. People tell me if you don't go along with the program, you'll mess your whole life up.

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Paul: The program [the curriculum] is a very confusing system. There's nobody to explain it to you. They just, you know, like pat you on the back. People tell me if you don't go along with the program, you'll mess your whole life up.

I say, well then, to hell with my life. You have to take some kind of stand. Everything you learn is lies.

It's their education. Not mine.
It's their history. Not mine.
It's their language Not mine.
You name it. It's theirs. Not mine.

A white teacher, he has not lived the life. He cannot relate any of the things to me. So I'm bored.

Victor: That's why you need community control....You know, they have a Jewish teacher teaching a course on Puerto Rican culture and history! So I asked him about the head of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, one of the leading poets, and a 19th-century philosopher—a very important philosopher—the cat predicted the emergence of China, man! So, anyway, I asked this teacher, and he didn't know none of them.

Turning to face Paul who thinks of himself more as a black man than as a Puerto Rican, Victor continued: George Washington had slaves, man. You know one time he traded a black man for a pig? *Then turning to me:* We told the librarian we wanted a picture of Malcolm X. We said we would supply our own picture and everything. But she said, 'No.' We wanted his picture up there with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Paul: He [Malcolm X] did not contribute to their culture.

Victor: The librarian said he preached hate. He...Paul! Get your mother to complain about George Washington's picture!

Paul: *(quietly, embarrassed)* No, man, not my mother.

Victor: Well, get *somebody's* mother....We asked the librarian to get *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* She said, 'Some books you have to wait three years.'...It's still not there.

Before Benjamin Franklin, Paul attended Food and Maritime High School.

Paul: That's a school where you just get parts.
One day you get arms.
Another day your heart.
Another day — ideas...until you graduate — a robot — to work for them. [At Benjamin Franklin] I was writing a book about every class — what was going on. I gave it to my English teacher. She tore it up.
I just stopped going along with the program. Starting with the pledge of allegiance to the flag. I stop there. I don't stand for the flag. Civil Liberties Union says I don't have to.

Victor: I had a lot of cuts. I had about 50 cuts. They didn't put *one* cut down on my [report] card. These people try any way to get rid of you.

Deborah: *(aggressively)* Negro colleges are not equipped. Right now they're [the white colleges] on top. They have what we want. I think we should go to their schools and learn — you know, what they have — so we can come back and teach our own. I mean — something about a Negro college that... I mean, they [white employers] just don't take you. *(Deborah began earnestly arguing with Larry:)*
But you've been around black people all your life. You're black yourself so you know how they feel and how they think. The white man is the person you don't know how he feels and thinks.

Larry: I do.

Deborah: *(amazed)* How can you say that?

Larry shrugged, and rather than try to answer her, he threw a question back. Larry had earlier remarked that practically everyone at "Ben Franklin" seemed to assume marriage right after high school. He now asked Deborah how she would manage to go to college if she married. Deborah did not challenge his assumption. She answered: "If you want to go to college, you're going to go. A child wouldn't hold me back. I mean, I'd make it my business to go."

Larry: Who is your husband? Is he a college graduate?

Deborah: *(suddenly shy)* I don't know.

Everybody laughed. I asked Larry if he had discussed his plans with any adults at school.

Larry: I talked with one, but not with my own guidance counselor. My own counselor scares me, he really does. Whenever I see him, he's always rushing. But the other teacher, whenever I see *him*, he always has time. He stands there and he will shake my hand and stand there for a few minutes. And we talk. He talks with me. I think he's a marvelous man, I really do. *(Larry proved more than willing to think aloud about Benjamin Franklin.)*

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I asked Victor for his ideas on school. He said: "Teachers should be ready to do anything. They should be your neighbors. They should not only be willing to teach you how to read, but they should be willing to cut throats, when the time comes."

Paul explained how "the program" began to seem irrelevant to him: "Starting with math. I felt that math had nothing to do with me."

Victor: *(laughing)* And math is probably the only thing they can't teach wrong—unless they say 2 and 2 is white.

Paul: *(not laughing)* They are teaching white nationalism. They tell you, when you are 34, and you buy a home, you'll be able to put up a flag pole—if you learn algebra.

Victor: I keep flunking algebra, man. I mean, seriously, I keep flunking algebra.

They were laughing hard now, and angry at the same time: Would they get to be 34-years-old? Where would they buy a house? Why would they put up a flag pole?

THE NEXT TIME I saw Victor, Paul was not there. Paul was spending the afternoon with his tutee, an 11-year-old boy he is teaching to read. But he and Victor had arranged for me to meet with two Benjamin Franklin High School students who are preparing for college.

In contrast to Paul and Victor who both have a kind of gentle manliness, Deborah Rogers, 17, and Larry Readous, 18, suggested the teenage tension produced by mimicry of adults. When they talked about "being black," there was considerable, nervous giggling.

Larry evidently felt he had to defend his intention to enter a Southern school, Morehouse College, rather than a "white" college: "I love black people, I really do." This was a declaration Larry made repeatedly as though the repetition alone would bolster its sincerity.

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"I wouldn't recommend this school to my sister because she's not as strong as I am. There's so many things here to really drag you down. I mean, for instance, it's so easy not to go to class. You can say to yourself, I can easily not go to class. The teacher won't question me because there are very few teachers who'll say, well, where's John?

I think that most teachers come here with the idea that these kids are dumb, ignorant, stupid. And they get in the classroom, the first month, and see that the kids are unruly and so forth, and they get in the same old bag. They say, I can't make them know anything. So the kids lose a whole lot. And I think the teachers do, too. Because I would imagine a lot of teachers really love to teach — if they're in the business of teaching. And it hurts everyone, all the way around....*(There was a silence. Finally Larry disturbed it:)* No, I can't knock the school. Because there's too much — around the kid. The whole environment affects the growth of a person. You can't deal with it on a level of, okay the kid comes to school–it's outside that you have to start. What you can learn in class is so unattached to slum life....

Deborah: *(interrupting)* But we have some of the top teachers here in this school, who *teach*. And then again, some of the students here, they don't want to work. And some of the teachers, they shouldn't keep telling the kids: 'You live in a poverty area, in a slum, and you can't get out.' We know where we're living. Teach us what you're supposed to teach.

Larry: I spoke with the principal and he said the general course prepares them for nothing. *(Victor, who was helping me with the tape recorder, didn't change expression.)*

Larry: So, some of us, and a few of the teachers formed the Franklin Improvement Committee to try and do something about this.

The "Franklin Improvement Committee" was the second student group I knew. The first was "The Franklin Student Movement" to which Victor and Paul belong. Paul had told me about the unbelievable battle waged by FSM in order to have more than *two* bathrooms opened —for three thousand students. Eventually, FSM won.

We stood between two barren columns at the top of the school stairs. I asked Deborah why she didn't belong to FSM. "Well," she parried, "what have they done? Just the bathrooms."

Victor said: "Yeah, but, even honor students have to go to the bathroom."

Deborah did not respond immediately. She was thinking how to completely distinguish herself from Victor and Paul.

At last, and rather viciously, she exploded: "Some of you people don't even plan on going to college." Looking at me, she continued: "They're general

Paul: This is a racist country, man. There *is* no in-between.

Victor: Paul. He's the weirdest cat I know. Like, I mean, where did you get your last name?

Paul: What do you mean, where did I get my name?

Victor: You better check that out. I don't think that's your last name.

Paul: I told you, it's a slave name. It's a slave name.

Victor: No, man, it's an Italian name.

Paul: How do you know?

Victor: You know, like that criminal—what was his name? Lucky Luciano—it's an Italian name.

Paul: *(stubbornly)* It's a slave name.

Victor: *(losing patience)* But man, don't you understand what I'm telling you? There *were* no Italians when there were slaves.

Paul: My great grandfather, he was a merchant—an Italian merchant. My great grandmother, she was a slave in Spain. She was one of the slaves of the Queen of Spain, or somebody. Luciano, he was a merchant; it was and still is a famous name in Italy.

Victor: How do you know that, man?

Paul: I asked my great grandmother.

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At last, and rather viciously, she exploded: "Some of you people don't even plan on going to college." Looking at me, she continued: "They're general students. They have no kind of average. They're nothing. How you gonna ask for things if you're nothing? They don't even have no kind of average!"

I waited for Victor to say something, but he didn't.

SOME WEEKS LATER, I met with Paul and Victor again. They were preoccupied by summer jobs; working for S.T.I.R.—Special Tutoring In Reading, a program financed by the Jobs Corps and under the aegis of the Citizens' Council of Columbia University. They seemed pleased and proud about their work.

Paul: Don't teach me Robert Frost. He has nothing to do with me. Don't tell me about the birds and the bees out in someplace like Queens. But his [Victor's] poetry's telling me about the beautiful things in my own neighborhood—things I don't know about. Teach me black history. Teach me Puerto Rican history. I'm here because I have to be—not because I want to be here.

As Puerto Ricans, did they consider themselves black or white?

Paul: *(quickly)* I'm a black man. I'm a black man.

Victor: Well, I'm not black and I'm not white. I'm in-between.

Paul: *(stubbornly)* It's a slave name.

Victor: *(losing patience)* But man, don't you understand what I'm telling you? There *were* no Italians when there were slaves.

Paul: My great grandfather, he was a merchant—an Italian merchant. My great grandmother, she was a slave in Spain. She was one of the slaves of the Queen of Spain, or somebody. Luciano, he was a merchant; it was and still is a famous name in Italy.

Victor: How do you know that, man?

Paul: I asked my great grandmother.

Victor: You asked her! When?

Paul: Last Christmas.

Victor: *(whistling)* How old was she?

Paul: A hundred and six.

Nobody said anything. Paul relaxed. A month ago he had said he wanted to be a truck driver. "Just get a truck and drive on the road. Have nothing to do with the man." I didn't ask him whose truck he would drive, or who would determine his destination.

This afternoon Paul was saying he would join the Merchant Marine as soon as he "got out." Victor commented on the connection between Paul's latest, stated ambition and the Italian merchant, Luciano. Paul made no reply.

To change the subject, I asked what they wanted to be:

Paul: Be myself, really. Get out of the country.

Victor: I'm going to go on as a poet. I want to be in that situation where I both write and help people. *(He thought for a while and then said:)* I want to teach.

Paul: Teach! Teach what?

Victor: *(firmly)* Teach whatever I know. Help people by teaching.

I have been thinking of Victor and Paul, students in the "general course" that prepares them "for nothing." I have been thinking of Paul and his pride – of Victor and the poetry he writes – and of Deborah who wants to "come back and teach our own." I have been thinking about the well-rehearsed speech of Larry who wants to "do advertising – for the general public," but who will go to Morehouse College because – "I love my people, I really do."

In this year of Detroit, the most hopeful thing I know is that three of these four students want to teach. The most hopeful and the most amazing truth I know is that two of these students – the two who were put at the bottom of "the jellybeans" – *are already teaching*! For all of them, for Deborah and Paul and Victor and Larry, the good and worthwhile life is tied directly to the faithful act of teaching.

But what will happen for them? Who will keep their faith? What happened for them at "Ben Franklin" where I had to check my own eyes to see that there were trees – you can't see the trees for the school.

In a poem called "The Jungle," Victor has written:

"We would not be
like flowers resting dead in some hill
not even getting credit for its color
or the way it smells."

And what he wrote he means.

June Meyer is a young writer and poet living in New York City. She has also worked as a researcher in the housing division of Mobilization for Youth.